

Message

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Subject: News Update: Thomas Burke Touts Research's Value To New NAS Committee (Inside EPA)

EPA Science Advisor Touts Research's Value To New NAS Committee

By Maria Hegstad

Inside EPA

July 11, 2016

<http://insideepa.com/daily-news/epa-science-advisor-touts-researchs-value-new-nas-committee>

EPA Science Advisor Tom Burke is touting the value of EPA research and its main grant program, Science to Achieve Results (STAR), telling a National Academy of Sciences (NAS) committee that such research is vital to addressing the problems of the future.

Burke, speaking at a recent meeting of the NAS committee, expressed concerns that emergencies during his tenure have pulled him and other scientists in EPA's Office of Research and Development (ORD) away from long term research that allows agency decision makers to predict environmental problems rather than react to them.

"How do we keep the long view alive when it's so important for us to be out there in Flint?" Burke asked. "There wasn't a single emergency I've responded to that couldn't have been predicted by looking at infrastructure. I think Flint was predictable. I think the shift in energy sources and [hydraulic fracturing, with its seismic and drinking water contamination concerns] was predictable."

EPA has asked the NAS panel to examine the STAR program's "scientific merit, benefits to the public, and overall contributions in the context of other relevant research" as well as "recommend ways to enhance the program's scientific merit, impact of its results, and other benefits," according to a document outlining a proposal for the NAS review.

NAS and agency science advisors have lauded the program for producing quality research and bringing top students to EPA, but the program has seen increasing funding cuts in recent years.

At the kickoff meeting for the new NAS panel, Burke outlined challenges to gaining support for long-term EPA research and the agency's grants program, which he and colleagues argued are closely linked and important. These include explaining how investigator-initiated research is helpful to the problems of today and better integrating social scientists into ORD's work, such as including better economic analyses of the agency's decisions as Congress has urged, he said.

"Very few people understand the broad reach of ORD and the way that STAR has supported the leaders of our field," Burke said. "Yes, I've been a STAR recipient. The STAR fellowship was one of the greatest tools that we had. And I hate to use the past tense."

One of Burke's colleagues, Jim Johnson, director of EPA's National Center for Environmental Research, which oversees ORD's STAR and other grant funding, noted at the June 21 meeting that EPA has not funded its STAR fellowship program for college and graduate students in several years. Johnson told the committee that the STAR fellowship would continue to have no funding for fiscal years 2016-2017.

Science Fellowships

EPA's Science Advisory Board wrote former Administrator Lisa Jackson in alarm in 2013 when the STAR fellowship program was first eliminated.

ORD officials responded that the White House had decided to consolidate all science fellowships into one large grant program administered by the National Science Foundation -- a decision that STAR grant supporters say could cost EPA and the environmental field a new generation of environmental scientists.

Pointing to decreased funding for the STAR grant program, Johnson reminded the new committee of a previous NAS report, which he said recommended that between 15 and 20 percent of ORD's budget should be STAR grants. Currently, STAR grants make up 8 percent of ORD's budget, about half of the NAS recommendation, he said.

Johnson also talked about the value of the STAR grant program, noting that these grants were closely tied to ORD's five-year research plans. "One way of measuring STAR is that STAR [funded research] contributed to 13 percent" of the citations in the 2009 Integrated Science Assessment for particulate matter (PM), an assessment that supports the PM National Ambient Air Quality Standard.

The chairman of the new NAS Committee, Mark Utell, an environmental medicine professor at the University of Rochester, indicated that the group will craft a list of information it wants from EPA to assist the committee members in writing their advice to the agency.

One of the committee members, Mitchell Small, an environmental engineering professor at Carnegie Mellon University, noted Johnson's metric related to citations. He asked if it would be possible for EPA to provide the committee with metrics of the number of citations per thousand dollars spent over the past five to 10 years. Johnson said staff would be able to provide that type of data.

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